

## The Fight for the New Capitol

John A. Kasson

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.

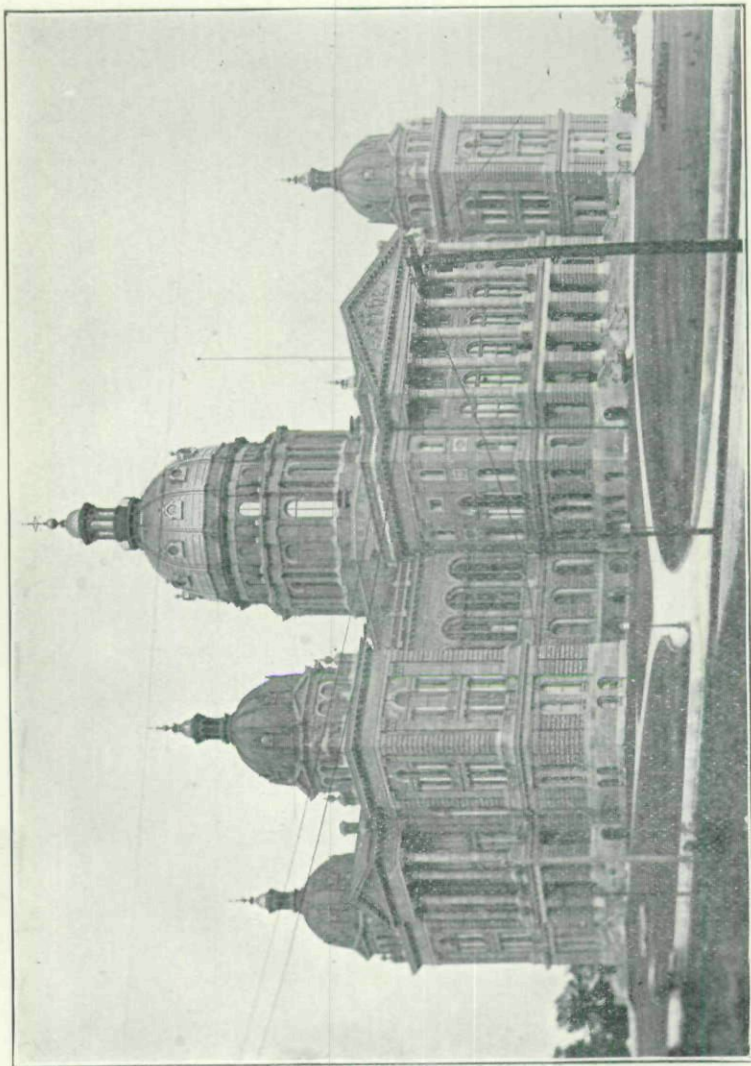
---

### Recommended Citation

Kasson, John A. "The Fight for the New Capitol." *The Annals of Iowa* 4 (1900), 241-262.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.11381>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)



THE NEW CAPITOL OF IOWA.

Erected by order of the Thirteenth General Assembly. The architect and designer was A. H. Piquenard of Chicago, Ill. The Capitol Commissioners, under whose direction it was erected were Messrs. Maturin L. Fisher, John C. Foots, Peter A. Dey and Robert S. Finkbine. Mr. Fisher died in 1879 and was succeeded by Cyrus Foreman. Commissioner Finkbine was Superintendent of Construction. Gen. Ed Wright secretary of the Board and Assistant Superintendent. The structure cost \$2,574,555.35.

# ANNALS OF IOWA.

---

VOL. IV, No. 4.

DES MOINES, IOWA, JANUARY, 1900.

3D SERIES.

---

## THE FIGHT FOR THE NEW CAPITOL.

BY HON. JOHN A. KASSON.

At the Fifth Reunion of the Iowa Pioneer Law Makers Association, held in Des Moines February 12 and 13, 1896, the following paper, detailing the long contest for the erection of the present capitol, was read by Hon. John A. Kasson. Mr. Kasson was a member of the House of Representatives from Polk county in three legislatures—the 12th, 13th and 14th—and the leader of the successful movement to erect the New Capitol. He therefore speaks by authority and with the fullest knowledge of the subject. It was due to his earnest efforts and commanding influence that our State was led to abandon the old and most insufficient edifice which had answered for a capitol from 1857 to that time, and was only finally given up to the bats in 1883. It is due to Mr. Kasson, who has served his State and the Nation so long and so well, that the facts concerning this historical contest shall be made matters of permanent record in these pages. It is proper to add that this paper has been carefully revised by the author.—EDITOR OF THE ANNALS.

The early inhabitants of our State, distant from commercial centers, with slow mail wagons and infrequent postoffices, had few occasions which excited general interest, or united large numbers of men in common and sympathetic action. The excitement most familiar to the rural counties of early Iowa, aside from the political elections, were the animated struggles over the location of county seats and the erection of county buildings, location of a State Capitol, the choice of sites for public institutions, or the erection of expensive public buildings. In several such struggles I participated as lawyer or legislator. Of the most important of those, involving the largest appropriations ever made in this State for a single object, I have been asked by your committee to tell the story.

At the time of which we speak our young State—only twenty-two years old—had very few public buildings of im-

posing size, and none at all laying claim to architectural beauty or grandeur. Our people were too generally educated and intelligent not to desire something worthy of admiration, something expressing the dignity and higher aspirations of the State. This sentiment was finding expression in improved school-houses, court-houses and churches in many parts of the State. These, being home institutions and within view of the people who paid the charges, were more easily obtained. But upon the question of a costly building for the State at large, which the majority of people would seldom if ever see, it became far more difficult to win the popular suffrage. An appeal for united action becomes difficult in proportion to the area of territory and of people appealed to. The splendid architecture of the Greeks was decreed by people occupying a much smaller territory than Iowa. If the Macedonians and Thracians had also been called on to vote a great building in Athens by the aid of their taxes it would have been voted down.

The famous contest for the erection of our present State Capitol began in 1868, in the Twelfth General Assembly, and continued through the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Assemblies, covering a period of five years.

The Fifth General Assembly had authorized a Commission to select a site for the permanent Capitol within a radius of two miles from the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers; and, according to the unjust practice of the time, they were to receive from private persons gifts and grants to the State in consideration of such location. A few of the land owners of Des Moines granted something over twenty acres of valuable land and lots, most of it on an elevated site overlooking the two beautiful rivers which here unite their waters. They were further required by the act to erect at their own cost, for the Legislature, a temporary State House, and until this should be done without charge to the State the Capitol was to remain at Iowa City. This house was to be built as cheaply as possible and in haste, and the



Twelfth Assembly was the first to occupy it, in 1858. The usual disappointment to local investors followed. They had expected to recoup themselves by a rapid advance in prices of land and lots around the new Capitol. But these prices did not advance as expected. The financial crisis of 1857 also intervened. The town was still distant from railroads, whose progress had been suspended by embarrassments in the finances of the country. Town lots, which had been almost as good as legal tender, were abundant and unsaleable. Money was scarce, and the times depressing. Nearly all the donators to the State were ruined in purse and credit. The Legislature, session after session, assembled in the hastily erected building which they had received from a few citizens as a sort of forced loan, and took no steps toward a new building.

As years went by and the Civil War was ended and money became plenty, and yet no appropriations were expended by the State to utilize or improve the donated property, while the city and county were perpetually deprived of even the right to subject it to taxes, the people grew impatient and resolved to call on the State government to execute their part of the obligation, which was to improve the property which had been ceded to it on that implied condition. There was also among our people some apprehension that if the Legislature should continue too long in the small, inconvenient and decaying building put up by the efforts of men now bankrupt, dissatisfaction would open the way for reviewing the whole question of the permanent location of the Capitol. There was an interest along the line of the North-Western railroad quite ready for a campaign having that object. Such was the condition when the Twelfth General Assembly met at Des Moines. Jonathan W. Cattell was then Polk county's senator, in the second half of his term. At the time of the fall election in 1867 I was far away seeking rest and recreation after several years of hard public labor, when notice came to me that I had been elected to the

House of the Twelfth General Assembly, with J. H. Hatch for my colleague. On my return they told me of the special object of Polk county in sending me to that Legislature.

John Russell, of Jones county, was elected speaker. The hastily erected structure in which the Assembly was convened had already suffered from the ravages of time and weather, and had become really insecure as well as inadequate to the wants of the State. The Senate promptly passed a concurrent resolution and sent it to the House proposing a Joint Committee to examine the building and report on its sufficiency for the ceremonies of the inauguration, which usually attracted to it a large crowd of people. But this committee reported it safe for all who could be accommodated within its limited area. We had the good fortune to secure a friendly Committee on Public Buildings, of which my colleague, Mr. Hatch, was Chairman, with that most excellent and intelligent member, R. M. Burnett, of Muscatine, for his second.

On the 1st of February that committee reported "an act to provide for the erection of a State House," limiting the cost to \$1,500,000. When the bill was taken up on March 3d, Charles Dudley, of Wapello, offered a dilatory substitute which was antagonized by all the friends of the bill. An amendment was offered by George Ordway limiting the cost to \$1,000,000, and authorizing the Census Board to obtain plans and specifications to be reported to the Thirteenth General Assembly. Ordway's amendment was defeated by a vote of sixty-five to twenty-nine, and Dudley's substitute was rejected by a vote of sixty to thirty-three. These votes were very encouraging to the friends of the measure. But the next day the fight was renewed by another effort to limit the cost to \$1,000,000, and again to \$600,000. On the smaller amount the yeas were only seventeen, and the nays seventy-three. But on the question of a \$1,000,000 limit our canvass indicated to us the expediency of compromising on that sum for the present, and it was carried by a vote of

sixty-two yeas to twenty-six nays. On March 5th the fire of amendments continued all along the line, and some which were embarrassing were adopted, but none which defeated the main object of the bill, which was to actually begin the work and engage the State for its prosecution.

After many amendments of detail, including a remarkable and purely selfish one from Clinton county, that no contract for stone or lime should be made until a reasonably direct railroad transportation could be had between the Northwestern railroad and Des Moines, the bill was ordered to be engrossed and read a third time the next day. On March 7th, after the bill had been engrossed, an effort was made by L. W. Stuart, of Jackson, to kill the bill by its indefinite postponement, which was defeated. It was read a third time and passed the House on that day by a vote of fifty-five to thirty-six.

In the Senate the auspices changed. A few memorials had been presented there against the commencement of the work, notably from Buchanan and Webster counties. The House bill reached the Senate on the day of its passage by the House, and went to the proper Senate committee, of which George E. Griffith, of Warren, was chairman. It was favorably reported back on March 14th and made a special order for March 19th. A substitute for the bill was offered by John Meyer, of Jasper, but defeated. Madison M. Walden moved to table it, but failed by a vote of twenty-five to twenty. The Senator from Buchanan tried to have it indefinitely postponed, and lacked only two votes (twenty-two to twenty-three) of success. Then began a running fire of amendments, one of which prevailed, striking out the building committees of the two houses from the board of commissioners on plans. With this encouragement its enemies rushed other amendments forward, and some of them endangering the fate of the bill were adopted. The opponents of the bill soon found themselves on top in the fight. They pressed their advantages like good soldiers until Cattell



could only rally votes enough to postpone its further consideration to March 25th, and print the bill which had been much cut up by the various changes introduced. The bill and its friends in the Senate were alike demoralized. It was almost a rout. On March 26th, an amendment in the nature of a substitute, to merely authorize an advertisement for plans for a new Capitol and providing for the repair of the old State House, was offered by Senator G. G. Bennett, and adopted by a vote of twenty-seven to twenty. Then under the leadership of Senator Marcus Tuttle this amendment was reconsidered by a vote of twenty-six to twenty-two, and the bill and amendments were referred back to the Committee on Public Buildings. All this indicated a lack of organization on either side. The committee reported on March 30th a substitute on the lines of Bennett's amendment calling for plans instead of authorizing the work, and appropriating for repairs of the old State House. This was so amended as to call also for a plan of a building to cost \$2,000,000. The substitute as then amended was adopted on April 3d by a vote of thirty-nine to seven. It seemed the only thing then to be accomplished in the Senate. The bill came back to the House in its new form at so late a day that the only course open to the friends of the Capitol was to accept it. It was passed there on the same day by a vote of fifty-nine to six.

At the end of the Twelfth General Assembly the new Capitol, instead of being really born, was only authorized to be born in case the next General Assembly should permit it. We had lost our first position, had fallen back on our second line, and waited and hoped for a reinforcement in the future report of the commissioners on building plans to be adopted. We foresaw a greater fight to come. We had perhaps gained some advantage in having aroused the attention of the State to the question.

To the next General Assembly Polk county sent B. F. Allen to the Senate. He was then a prosperous and influen-



tial banker, widely known in the State, and an old settler. He was no speaker, but perhaps on that account better adapted to conciliate the Senate by his pleasant manners and practical good sense. His effective work there fully justified our confidence in him. To the House the county sent George W. Jones, who, like Senator Allen, was not a speaker, but was supposed to be a good worker among his associates on the floor. They also returned me for the second time to the House.

Of our old and irreconcilable enemies, J. W. Traer, of Benton, Charles Dudley, of Wapello, Joel Brown, of Van Buren, were all back again, and were now strongly reinforced by a new and able leader, M. E. Cutts, of Mahaska, who loved opposition and a fight for its own sake and for the fun of it. He was argumentative, sarcastic, bold in statement and persistent, refusing all concessions, and proof against conviction. He far more loved to attack than defend any cause. On our side many old friends of the measure were returned, and notably among them John P. Irish, of Johnson, who was ready, eloquent and strong in debate. My good friend, Pat. Gibbons, of Keokuk, was also there to aid us with his lips overflowing with Irish humor. Many other strong friends of ours were content to be silent voters.

The members of a popular Legislature may always be divided into two classes. On one side are the members who vote one way or the other on a question according to their personal convictions of right and expediency; on the other are the members whose vote is dictated by the fear that it may be used against them by political or personal enemies among their constituents. Especially if new expenditures are provided for in a bill, their timidity leads them to vote in the negative to be on the safe side. The vote of these latter members is dictated, not by a responsible judgment, but by fear only, which is as corrupting to conscientious legislation as the hope of a reward. When the constituency has a settled judgment upon a particular measure it is quite right

and natural that their representative should obey it. But in general it is to be remembered that the fundamental principle of our American republic is government by the people indirectly, not directly. They intrust their own power of judgment upon most measures of legislation to their elected agents in whose capacity as representatives they have confidence. This American principle the fathers of our modern constitutions deliberately adopted in contradiction to the old Greek democracies. These voted directly on public measures, and had no representative bodies. Our fathers knew and discussed the histories of these ancient democracies, and found that they degenerated into a changeable and contradictory government by a mob, led by corruptible demagogues, or mobocrats, who (as the antetypes of Tammany) themselves received bribes for their popular leadership. Even the great Demosthenes himself accepted such a bribe. The ripened result of Anglo-Saxon and even of Latin civilization is government by elected representatives of the people, whose judgment on measures shall be conscientiously converted into the law of the land.

But in the consideration of the Capitol bill these principles were abandoned by nearly one-fourth of the members of the House, whose votes were guided by their fears and not by their deliberate judgment, as the result will show. We knew by personal conversation that the honest convictions of a large majority of the members were favorable to beginning then this important public work.

There was also another interest adverse to us. Our State institutions were widely scattered over the State. Every representative of a county where one of these was situated was eager for a large appropriation for his particular institution and feared that an annual appropriation for a new Capitol would reduce the amount of State funds on which he could draw. The combination of these local interests was a powerful one, and very threatening, and it was employed for its full effect. This element of opposition was also reinforced

by the customary appeals to outside jealousy of the Capitol.

Such was the condition in the House when the new bill was taken up for discussion. A. R. Cotton, of Clinton, was Speaker, and Samuel Murdock, of Clayton, was Chairman of the Building Committee.

In the Twelfth General Assembly we had introduced the Capitol bill first in the House, passed it by a good majority, and sent it to the Senate, where it was sadly mutilated and then slaughtered. In the Thirteenth we reversed this process and had the bill first acted on in the Senate, where George E. Griffith, of Warren, was again Chairman of the Building Committee. This committee, having now before them the plans and specifications authorized by the previous assembly, reported the new bill on January 28th, and the Senate made it a special order for February 4th. It was then taken up, slightly amended, and on the same day engrossed by a vote of twenty-five to twenty-one. On the next day it was read the third time and passed by a vote of twenty-seven to eighteen, having a majority of two-thirds in the Senate. W. G. Donnan, its opponent at the previous session, now supported it, and Samuel H. Fairall, of Johnson, admirably controlled its parliamentary management.

Thus strongly approved by the Senate it came over to the House. But the House seemed to have changed after two years as well as the Senate, only in the reverse way. Not changed, I think, in its real opinion, but in the courage of its convictions. The opposition was now much more effectively organized under the aggressive and much more effective leadership of Cutts, whose special province it was to terrorize the representatives from rural counties by predictions of excessive taxation and poverty as a consequence of building the new Capitol. Traer, of Benton, and Joseph Ball, of Jefferson, pushed the equally indefensible argument that it was a mere local enterprise for the benefit of Des Moines. The final result was in doubt from the beginning of the session to the end of the contest. Every day was a day of anxiety to



its friends. It was destined to be the longest continued and the toughest parliamentary battle I ever fought in either capitol, at Des Moines or at Washington.

The bill was received from the Senate February 7th, and upon the customary motion to refer it to the regular House committee, the fight began. Traer, who was our opponent from the beginning, jumped to his feet to oppose even the usual reference to a committee. Cutts wanted at once to indefinitely postpone it, while Dudley wanted it to come up speedily to be killed. Wm. Mills, of Dubuque, and others beside myself demanded the usual fair treatment for the bill. On my motion to refer, its enemies further resisted by the demand, unusual on such occasions, for the yeas and nays, but the reference was carried by a vote of fifty-three to thirty-nine. Several of those were of the timid class and could not be counted on for its final passage. As a preliminary skirmish the showing of votes was a discouragement to us. But I seized upon the expressed desire of its enemies for early action to secure the adoption of a motion making it the special order for an early day after the impending recess. When the day arrived the committee had not reported. Its chairman was absent, and we were compelled to ask a postponement of the special order to March. Again Dudley and Cutts fought the proposition, even as a courtesy, and demanded yeas and nays on the motion. This time they were badly beaten by a vote sixty-two to eighteen. But this incident proved to us that the fight was to be a desperate one to the end, and all along the line without quarter.

On the 8th of March, after a preliminary skirmish over an amendment, the most exciting debate of all the sessions came on. C. C. Applegate, of Scott, opened on our side with a short and very sensible speech, giving his reasons for supporting the bill. Traer and Ball competed for the floor to open for the opposition, and the Speaker assigned it to Mr. Traer. He moved the indefinite postponement of the bill. His points were that the finances of the State were in a bad

condition and would not permit this additional expenditure, that it could not be granted without increasing the rate of taxation, and that the charitable institutions needed all the support that the revenues of the State would permit. It was a temperate speech, though his figures were carelessly assembled. Patrick Gibbons, the genial member from Lee, followed him with some humorous and some sensible remarks in favor of the Capitol. Ball, of Jefferson, then made a rambling talk about everything except the bill itself, and aroused much laughter by his talk, and declared his unalterable opposition to the bill. Next came our friend, John P. Irish, with a manly and strong speech in advocacy of the measure, replying to both Mr. Traer and Mr. Ball. The latter, in the course of Mr. Irish's speech, admitted if he were left free to vote he would vote for this appropriation—a candid admission which truly represented the real inclination of the majority. After Irish came Cutts, the Ajax of the opposition. He made a long speech of mingled wit, vamping and argument, and dealt especially with the amount of taxes delinquent in different counties as evidence of the poverty of the treasury and people. He displayed this poverty in picturesque language, and portrayed "little children running around with their little knees protruding through their pants, their coats all ragged and tattered and torn, their little caps with the fore-pieces off and all torn, their father had gone to the county seat to pay out the last half dime which is to go into that magnificent State House." He also rehearsed that oft-repeated picture of English taxation where everything is taxed from the cradle to the grave, and even added some embellishments to that. He appealed to every element which might create timidity in the members, excite their prejudices and turn them by both these influences against the bill. He aroused the apprehension of the members from the institutional counties lest money should be lacking for their home wants. It would be difficult, indeed, to surpass that speech in its artful adaptation to intimidate



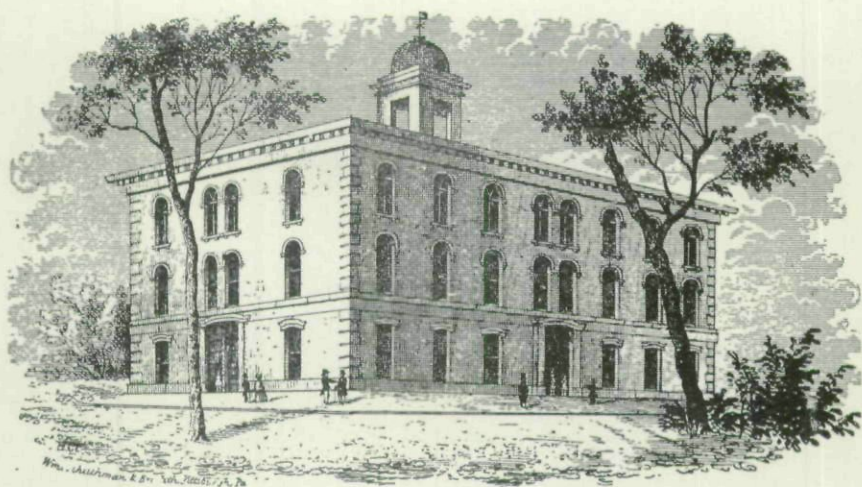
fearful members and to prejudice the doubtful against the entire proposition. It is always easier to combat a host of reasonable arguments than a single squad of fearful prejudices.

Still, it remained for me to take up the debate in support of the bill.

I honestly believed that the character and reputation of my State was depreciated by its mean and narrow housing of its governing bodies. A grand building, displaying the noble lines and proportions of elegant architecture, is an object lesson and source of instruction for all the people. Like a superb monument to a national hero, it awakens noble sentiments, and is an inspiration to a loftier plane of thought and of life. A state, like an individual, must present a decent exterior to the world. A man may indeed clothe himself in ragged garments and yet be a virtuous citizen; but among men generally he will have a discredited reputation, and invites neglect and contumely. So it is with a State. Her outer garments are her capitol, her public institutions, her school-houses, her churches, and the men whom she honors with her suffrage. If these win admiration and praise, her place is exalted among her sisters of the republic. But in my speech I dared not trust much to sentimental arguments. It was necessary to keep our feet on solid ground. The following principal propositions were presented by me:

1. That the temporary State House donated to the State was wholly insufficient for the accommodation of the Legislature and State officers, had become wholly unsafe for State archives, and was liable to quick destruction by fire and even by storm, owing to the sinking and separation of its walls. These allegations were proved by the absence of all committee rooms, by the fact that committee papers were carried about in the pockets or hats of committeemen, and by their own personal observation of defects in the walls, by the fact of previous fires and by the report of a professional architect.
2. That the figures presented by Messrs. Traer and





The Old Capitol at Des Moines, as erected in 1837. It subsequently underwent many alterations and improvements before it was abandoned in 1884-7.

Cutts of the poverty of the State and of its treasury shamefully discredited our financial condition, and were grossly incorrect, and that the appropriation demanded could be paid out of existing resources without increase of taxation, and without harm to other State institutions. This was proved by official statistics from the Auditor and from the Treasurer of State. 3. That the old building would become absolutely untenable by the time the new Capitol could be finished if begun now. 4. That the implied obligation of the State to build a new Capitol in consideration of the valuable grants of lands and pecuniary sacrifices made by the people of this county should be fulfilled. The speech in support of these propositions, being much interrupted by a rattling fire of questions and remarks, occupied the remainder of March 8th and part of the ensuing forenoon. At its conclusion Cutts again rallied all his ingenuity to discredit the official financial statements which I had produced—apparently somewhat to his surprise—and Irish interposed also, in reply to him.

But the speeches were not all made up of mathematics by any means. Sarcastic hits, wit and humor were interspersed. My old farmer friend from Jefferson, Representative Ball, was much given to remarks tending to excite hilarity, the fun being sometimes intentional and sometimes accidental, and Irish often drew him out. Once he got in a good point and the laugh on me. During this debate the public interest was so aroused that all strangers in the city and all residents who could crowd into the small chamber had packed the galleries to suffocation. The ladies were conspicuous and in great numbers. Ball and Cutts regarded this demonstration as an attempt by Des Moines to influence members to vote for the bill. In answer to my description of the dangerous condition of the old building, the sharp old farmer from Jefferson said, "Don't you see, they have sent all these ladies and gentlemen to prove that there is danger here. They sit here, I have no doubt, in danger and fear.

I must say that I am pretty nearly—not quite, though—concluded or satisfied to vote for the bill.” The House saw the point and laughed with him. I answered my old friend that: “His modesty prevents him from seeing that the ladies of Des Moines are not here to give an example of their courage, but on account of the attractions of the gentleman from Jefferson.” Thereupon, the record says, there was “loud and continued laughter.” Still undaunted, Brother Ball came back with the remark, “I have always had an excellent opinion of myself, and it is now demonstrated to my satisfaction.” To this I responded, “I take back what I said about the gentleman’s modesty,” and both remarks aroused good-natured laughter.

After the second speeches of Cutts and Irish I took the floor for a final and measured reply to all its opponents, and an appeal to members to vote according to their honest convictions; and then demanded the previous question in order to get a vote before the adjournment on that day. Cutts and all the enemies of the bill voted against the previous question, but it was carried by the small majority of forty-seven to forty-five, and on the main question of engrossment it carried by forty-nine votes to forty-eight. It was uncomfortably close, and indicated the necessity of more time to canvass the members for the two additional votes necessary to its adoption. We did not dare at that time to take the final vote on its passage. I promptly made the motion to adjourn the House and felt greatly relieved when it was adopted. The next day the committee reported it duly engrossed; but for four weeks we did not dare to call it up for a third reading, for we could not assure to our side the necessary fifty-one votes to pass it. The intimidating tactics of our leading enemies had been too effective. We knew by our canvass that the honest judgment of a decided majority was with us. Yet they were afraid to vote their convictions. It was an anxious month of waiting for the friends of the new Capitol.



In the meantime both sides were vigilant and active. The enemies of the measure created some further intimidation by throwing out intimations of attempted bribery. Its friends denounced and ridiculed them, and challenged the proof. There were also some hostile remonstrances and some favorable petitions; and other home influences over members were specially provided in the meantime, and forwarded to the Capitol. At last it was certified to us that if we would admit a couple of riders on the third reading we could secure the additional votes required. The situation was so critical that we accepted, though with great reluctance on my part, the proposed amendments. Both sides rallied all their forces for the final trial, and we on our side resolved to call up the bill for its third reading on the morning of April 8th, which was four weeks after its engrossment. As I left my house on the morning of that day for the Capitol, I stopped at the hotel to see that no dilatory friend of the bill should be lingering there. At that moment a citizen hastened to tell me that —, of — county, whose vote we counted on, had just been seen going into a drinking saloon near by. I sent him to look for this member, and received the report that he had slipped out the back door. I knew he loved the bottle and I suspected mischief. I learned that he had been beset by some anti-Capitol members the night before who had drugged him with whisky, put him in his room and locked his door, thinking he would not awake in time for the vote. I dispatched a wagon instantly for my good friend, Father Brazil, whose influence over this member I knew, with an urgent request to follow him and bring him to the State House as soon as possible. I then proceeded to the State House with increased anxiety, not knowing whether that one absent vote might not defeat our bill at the very crisis of its fate. A short time before the voting began, however, I discovered the absentee entering the House, followed closely to his seat by the good priest who took post behind his chair, and did not let him out of his sight until

the voting was over. He found the absent member on the lonely bank of the 'Coon river, sitting solitary on a log, like a man either in manly shame of himself, or having a racking over-night headache. But when Father Brazil said, "Come with me," he went. The two rider amendments were adopted without a division, and the roll call began. Every member was present except three. Hall and galleries were crowded to overflowing, as they had been throughout the debate. Many members had roll-calls in their hands keeping count as the call proceeded, myself among them. The silence was intense—not a sound was heard save the clerk's monotonous call of names and the answer, aye or no. The phonographic report of that session prints the figures "20" after my name on the roll call. This will remind some of you of a laughable incident that occurred at the time. If we had fifty-one ayes (no matter about the nays) the bill became a law, and I was therefore only counting the ayes. At the moment the clerk called my name I was writing the number of yeas, and inadvertantly answered the call by shouting "twenty," at the top of my voice. It broke the silent tension of feeling, and for nearly two minutes the roll-call ceased, while the whole House and audience were convulsed with laughter. I do not know that the mistake made any votes for us, but it certainly put our opponents into a more amiable humor. The official count gave us one solitary vote to spare, fifty-two to forty-six, with only two absentees. The immense audience shook the frail walls of the old building with their applause. There was the usual motion to reconsider and to lay that on the table, upon which sixty-six members voted with our friends, and only thirty-one voted against them. Two-thirds of the House indirectly befriended the measure. This vote probably represented the real judgment of the House, certainly much more than the vote on its passage.

The Senate promptly concurred in the amendments, and the new Capitol was finally authorized by law. Of course there was joy in the capital city of Des Moines. The people

of Polk county expressed their satisfaction by a procession headed by music and bearing to my door a gold-headed cane, which I have handed over to Mr. Charles Aldrich as a souvenir of the event, to be deposited in that Capitol Museum which does so much honor to its founder and to the State.

The selection of the commissioners of the building was not left, as it should have been, to the responsibility of the Governor, nor even to the earnest friends of the new Capitol. Two of them, selected at large, were forced into the bill by the rider on its third reading, as an alleged condition for votes. Six others were nominated by congressional districts, and elected in joint legislative convention. My earnest request for a non-partisan board was not granted. The commission was too large, and the choice in most instances were dictated by partisan and personal considerations. We feared the result; and the result was bad. Under their direction the foundation was laid, but the work and materials were so defective that public rumor indicated the probability of another legislative fight in the next Assembly over the whole question of the Capitol. It might even endanger the entire project. The appropriation had been granted for only one term. It was required for the successful progress of the work that there should be a continuous annual appropriation. It was determined to make a fight for this in connection with the new bill, which seemed to have become necessary. In aid of this purpose, Polk county sent me back for the third time—to the Fourteenth General Assembly—with General J. M. Tuttle for my colleague, Mr. Allen being happily still in the Senate.

The Senate was unusually strong in its membership. It embraced Wm. Larrabee, Charles Beardsley, Samuel H. Fairall, Robert Lowry, Joseph Dysart, Samuel McNutt, Geo. W. Bemis, J. H. Merrill, B. B. Richards, Jacob G. Vail, G. R. Willett, and other good and able men. The House also included many strong men and good debaters. \* Among them may be mentioned L. L. Ainsworth, J. F. Duncombe, B. J. Hall, John



H. Gear, M. J. Rohlf, John P. Irish, Mills of Dubuque, Joshua G. Newbold, Fred O'Donnell, H. O. Pratt, and J. L. Williams.

A political assembly likes nothing better than an investigation for fraud or other misconduct. The Senate had now some reason for its fears, and started early on this line to discover whatever was wrong in the suspected foundation and suspicious contracts for materials. They passed a concurrent resolution for the appointment of a joint committee of investigation, and also appointed a special committee of their own body on the new Capitol, in addition to their own standing committee on public buildings. The House agreed to the joint investigating committee. Their report condemned the foundation and the quality of the stone. In the meantime a new bill was reported in both House and Senate. That of the Senate was not acted upon and was indefinitely postponed after the House bill reached the Senate.

The third and last important contest over the erection of the new Capitol was now inaugurated upon the report of the House Committee on Public Buildings, of which Wm. Butler was chairman. The amendatory act was reported on February 27, 1872, and its consideration was postponed from time to time until April 2, because of delay in the report of the investigating committee. On that day it was taken up, and I moved that the names of John G. Foote of Burlington, Maturin L. Fisher of Clayton county, Robert S. Finkbine and Peter A. Dey of Johnson county, two Republicans and two Democrats, all of whom bore the highest character, should be inserted in the bill as commissioners in charge of the building. The Governor was *ex-officio* chairman of the board. The old board was summarily abolished. After a hard struggle with the representatives of the institutional counties, a permanent annual appropriation of \$125,000 was secured, thus enabling the commission to proceed with necessary contracts for future delivery, and leaving to future legislatures only the question of additional grants of money to hasten the

work of construction, as the condition of the treasury might allow. Many amendments were offered to limit the total cost of the Capitol. L. L. Ainsworth, a formidable antagonist, who partially undertook the former role of Cutts, moved a limit of cost to \$750,000. This was defeated by sixty-nine votes to fourteen. A proposition for a limit of \$1,000,000 was also defeated. Duncombe moved a limit of \$1,000,000 which was lost by a vote of fifty-five to thirty-one. Another member proposed an absolute limit of \$1,500,000, which was also lost by fifty votes to twenty-seven. Nevertheless the judgment of the House seemed to concentrate, rather indefinitely, upon a cost of about one and one-half millions, for, when an amendment was offered that the commission should change the plan if they found that the cost would exceed that sum, it was barely defeated by a vote of forty-two to forty-one. Another similar amendment was lost by forty-four to forty. Finally, an amendment in effect instructing the commission to keep in view a cost of \$1,500,000, which was offered by B. J. Hall of Burlington, was carried by a vote of fifty-three to thirty-one, our friends accepting it. A provision offered by L. L. Ainsworth, like that of 1870, giving preference to all other appropriations over this for the Capitol, which cunningly appealed to the self-interest of the institutional counties, was adopted, our friends believing that it would be eliminated in the Senate. It was a provision wholly impracticable in administration. The bill was then engrossed and passed by the large vote of sixty-three to twenty-four.

The bill reached the Senate the next day and was promptly taken up on motion of Senator Fairall, on April 5th. The second section was amended as we hoped, by striking out the obnoxious provision which postponed this appropriation till all others were satisfied. The bill was then engrossed and passed immediated by thirty-four votes to nine in the Senate.

On the following day the Senate amendment, which was now the only point of difference between the two houses, was called up, and on my motion to concur there were forty-nine



votes in its favor to forty against it. Again we lacked two votes to meet the constitutional requirement. We were very near the end for which we had so long toiled and fought, and yet the constitutional clause requiring fifty-one affirmative votes to every law stood between us and final victory. We actively busied ourselves among the members and obtained a reconsideration of the vote. The same afternoon the repeated vote upon the question of concurrence with the Senate was raised to fifty-three to thirty-eight; and so, at last, the act became the law of the State. Under this act the work went on smoothly to completion.

The long fight for a Capitol worthy of the State, protracted through three General Assemblies and covering a period of five years, was now finished. The question whether we should have a fitting and dignified home for our State sovereignty, legislative, executive and judicial, and a safe depository for our State archives was at last settled in the affirmative. The new commissioners began with the foundation, replacing the bad material with good. (The condition of Mr. Fisher's health debarred him from active participation in the work.) The names of the eight old commissioners on the corner-stone, which would have perpetuated their failure with their names, disappeared from view. From this time onward the three active commissioners manifested the greatest care and a most wise discretion in every detail of the work. Never was a corrupt or misspent dollar charged to their account. That prime principle of honesty in the expenditure of public money which requires a dollar's worth for every dollar spent was their constant guide. Thanks to their unusual fidelity to this obligation, and to their wise tact in procedure, the senators and representatives trusted them session after session with amounts largely in excess of the original estimates until the cost of the finished structure has amounted to \$2,871,682.05. Instead of grumbling and dissatisfaction on the part of the people over the cost there was universal pride in the noble building. When I had the



honor to deliver the inaugural address by invitation of the Twentieth General Assembly in 1884, there was both legislative and popular satisfaction with the great enterprise. Every farmer and mechanic, every merchant and patriotic citizen of Iowa, as he views the grandeur of its proportions, the massive, time-defying walls, the splendid legislative chambers, the beautiful library, the fire-proof vaults, the large and convenient executive offices, the ample committee rooms, and its general adaptation to the wants of an intelligent and advancing State, feels and expresses satisfaction over this home of his State government. It is his constant boast that there is not a dishonest dollar from the base course to the crown of the dome. Even now, twelve years from its inauguration, the wants of the State have so grown as to occupy all its vast accommodations.

The names of John G. Foote, Peter A. Dey and Robert S. Finkbine should be long remembered among us as names of men who executed their duties faithfully and well, and who were above the sordid temptation to make private profit out of a public trust, under which so many men elsewhere have fallen.

This, gentlemen, is the story of the building of Iowa's Capitol which your committee invited me to relate. Some of its opponents at the first session, like Senators Donnan and Bennett, changed at the second to its support. None of its friends suffered because of their advocacy of it. None of its enemies seemed to have gained popularity by their hostility to it. Indeed, I was appealed to soon after the act was passed to go into the district of its leading opponent in the Thirteenth Assembly to help him in his struggle as a candidate for Congress. None of its supporters, so far as I have heard, suffered reproach for their honest votes. I may safely affirm that there is not today a patriotic Iowan between the two great rivers—not one in this beautiful Mesopotamia of ours—who either condemns or regrets the execution of this grand undertaking.

*Pioneer Law Makers:* We may safely write down in our records this permanent and capital truth for the guidance of public men in this proud State of ours. The people of Iowa do not like moral cowardice, nor the arts of the demagogue. They love an honest and brave man who tells them no lies, who gives sincere reasons for his faith and who has the courage of his convictions. Such a man may be always sure of their respect and confidence, and will never find shame even in defeat.

*Colleagues of former days:* The greatest service that this generation can render to the next in the interests of the State is to impress these truths upon the young. If our great republic is to maintain its noble career it must be ever training two generations of citizens in personal integrity and pure politics—this generation and the coming one. It is not enough that we have a staunch and honorable republic to-day. We must secure it for tomorrow, and again for the day after, to the end of time. This noble monument of the integrity of its builders, and its associated monument to the memory of Iowa soldiers, will remind future generations that honesty, patriotism and courage were the cherished virtues of their fathers in the nineteenth century. May the twentieth century inherit, develop and strengthen them.

---

GOVERNOR DODGE.—As far as we are personally concerned, we shall be sorry to see this gentleman removed. In his appointments he seems to us to have been impartial, and we believe he is highly esteemed by a large portion of the people of Wisconsin. Our acquaintance and personal regard for him have led us to make the foregoing remarks.—*Burlington Hawk-Eye*, March 11, 1841.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.